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NOTES ON THE ART OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.

BY G. W. T. OMOND.

ONE day, in December, 1870, three students of the University of Edinburgh were sitting in the Library of the Speculative Society. This is a long, narrow room, the sides of which are lined with bookcases. At one end there is a fireplace, and at the other a window, under which stands a glass case, containing the accounts kept by Sir Walter Scott when he was treasurer of the Society. In another room, that in which the debates take place, paintings of Scott and Francis Horner hang on one side, with Lord Brougham looking at them from above the mantelpiece on the other side. Everything is redolent of the eighteenth century, of the nights when Brougham, Horner, Lord Lansdowne, Jeffrey and a host of others, many of whom became famous men, declaimed on such topics as the National Character or the Growing Power of Russia. Some of the original furniture is still there, and the room is lighted by wax candles, as of old. It is a place in which a man, returning to it after many years, may linger in the dusk of a winter's afternoon, and call up memories of the past.

But these three students were full of the present and the future, and busy about an "University Magazine," which, some few weeks before, they had resolved to found. Lord Neaves—*Ultimus Romanorum*—had promised to write some verses; Professor Blackie, at an interview in his retiring-room, had exclaimed: "Tell me what you want. I am ready;" Dr. Joseph Bell, the model from whom Mr. Conan Doyle afterward drew Sherlock Holmes, was to furnish an article. And now Robert Louis Stevenson came to them; a slender figure of the middle height, in a peajacket; with something of a stoop, and inclined

to be narrow about the chest; black hair, worn rather long; eyes dark, but very bright and penetrating, and always with a lurking smile; in one hand a meerschaum pipe, and in the other a bundle of papers, which he offered as a contribution to the new venture. They went to lunch (these were simple days, and there were few clubs in the land) at a house of entertainment which occupied, as it probably still does, the site of the ancient Kirk o' Field. There Stevenson was solemnly added to the staff of editors, and the occasion was celebrated with such rites as the place and the years of the company suggested.

Stevenson himself, in his "Memories and Portraits," speaks of this business of the Magazine as a "piece of good fortune," by which he was able to see his literature in print, and tells how all four managed the first number with much bustle; how he and his friend, Walter Ferrier, looked after the second, and how he alone was responsible for the third. "It has long," he says, "been a solemn question who edited the fourth." His contributions were: "Edinburgh Students in 1824," "The Philosophy of Umbrellas" (in which Ferrier helped him), "The Modern Student Considered Generally," "Debating Societies," "An Old Scotch Gardener," and "The Philosophy of Nomenclature."

In April, 1871, however, this poor Magazine died a natural death, and was soon forgotten like its predecessors, such as "The Nimmo, or Alma's Tawse," or "The Anti-Nemo," in which we read, among the election news of 1832, how "Gibson Craig lost his top-boots the other night, when soliciting a voter in the Cowgate;" how Lord Advocate Jeffrey is to be known "by a mean, mercenary, political-unionist kind of appearance," and Christopher North "by a northeast squint of his eye, and a profusion of dirty, uncombed, carrotty locks," along with similar pleasantries which passed for humor sixty years ago. But any book-hunter who may chance on some stray copy of "The Edinburgh University Magazine," for 1871, ought to examine it; for it contains the first published writings of Stevenson. Should he wish to purchase it, he will find that, though it was originally sold for sixpence a number, and was largely used by its founders for lighting pipes, the market price has now risen to about ten guineas!

So, during that winter, the youth who from boyhood had been spinning sentences and playing at authorship, corrected his first proofsheets, and began the serious business of his life.

After his death, in 1894, a discussion arose about his style and methods of composition. It was already known to many that his methods had been laborious. It is true that, just as some great horses have run their best only under extreme pressure of whip and spur, some great writers have been unable to work save under stress of time or necessity. Sheridan is said to have been so lazy that nothing could persuade him to finish the "School for Scandal" but locking him into a room at Drury Lane with a quire of paper and a bottle of port. "Guy Mannerling" was begun and ended within the space of a few weeks. But, on the whole, cases such as these are the exception. "There is na workeman that can bothe worken wel and hastilie." Stevenson never forgot this. His method of writing fiction was as painstaking as, for instance, that of Mr. Fox or Lord Macaulay in writing history. Lord Holland found the manuscript from which he prepared Mr. Fox's History of James the Second for the press full of erasures, revisions and corrections, not so much of the facts as of the style; and to such an extent did Mr. Fox carry his striving after purity of language, that he once told Lord Holland he would admit no word into his book for which he had not the authority of Dryden. Lord Macaulay's method of composition was almost identical with that of Stevenson. "Macaulay," says Sir George Trevelyan, "never allowed a sentence to pass muster until it was as good as he could make it. He thought little of re-casting a chapter in order to obtain a more lucid arrangement, and nothing whatever of reconstructing a paragraph for the sake of one happy stroke or apt illustration." In like manner Stevenson could "labor terribly;" re-reading and re-casting; three weeks on one chapter; and sometimes the work of a whole day thrown into the waste-paper basket. Pains such as these have very often been bestowed on controversial works, every line of which was to be jealously criticized by some hostile eye. Pascal wrote one of the Provincial Letters thirteen times before it pleased him. Lord Brougham composed nine different perorations for his speech at the Queen's Trial. But surely, though many great novelists, especially some of the French novelists, have composed slowly and painfully, few have ever bestowed such labor on their works as Stevenson.

Much has been said about his "style," and how he acquired it. He has described himself as playing "the sedulous ape to Hazlitt,

to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire, and Obermann;" and he perhaps fancied that he had "found a style" in this way. But was the fact not rather this, that by these studies he acquired that copious vocabulary of choicest English, in which, after a manner peculiarly his own, he clothed his thoughts and gave them to his readers in the smoothly flowing sentences, which are always dignified, but never either dull or florid. Compare the first attempts of 1871 with what he wrote in later years, and it will be seen that his style was natural to himself, nor "aped" from any one, except as the poetry of Dunbar was aped from Chaucer, or the music of Beethoven from Haydn or Mozart. And it was not only with the style, or language, of his novels that Stevenson took similar pains. "Treasure Island," "Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde" (a deep allegory disguised as a *jeu d'esprit*), and, indeed, most of his books, are works of pure imagination. But, when composing his historical novels, he not only revised every word, and polished every sentence, but read hard in order to acquire a thorough knowledge of the scenes and times in which his characters were to appear. Take "Kidnapped." Here he was dealing with a period which had always attracted him. In the "Gossip on Romance," he tells us how some of his boyish companions used to like one kind of story, and some another. "For my part," he says, "I liked a story to begin with an old wayside inn, where, 'towards the close of the year 17—,' several gentlemen in three-cocked hats were playing bowls." His head was so full of highwaymen, and rides by moonlight, that for a long time the words, "Great North Road," "'ostler," "nag," sounded like music in his ears. As he walked about, his imagination running riot in the past, every place suggested some appropriate story; and the Hawes Inn at Queensferry caught his fancy more than any other. "Americans seek it already for the sake of Lovel and Oldbuck, who dined there at the beginning of the 'Antiquary.' But you need not tell me that is all; there is some story, unrecorded or not yet complete, which must express the meaning of that inn more fully." And so David Balfour, in the middle of the eighteenth century, finds himself at Queensferry, on the beach before the Hawes Inn.

As a preparation for writing this novel, Stevenson drudged through a more arduous course of solid reading than, probably,

many of his readers may suspect. The historical portion of the plot was found in Volume XIX. of the "State Trials," where the trial of James Stewart and Alan Breck Stewart, for the murder of Colin Campbell of Glenure, occupies between two and three hundred closely printed columns. Having studied every line of the evidence with minute care, he read all round the subject, borrowing from the Advocates' Library (for a length of time which called forth expostulations, fortunately for the world quite unheeded, from the keeper and other people), every book or pamphlet from which he could glean anything, to help him in producing a vivid picture of the state of Scotland during the years which followed the Forty-Five.

No detail, however trifling, either in the accounts of the trial or in the various works which he consulted, escaped his notice. His description of the ludicrous figure cut by the people, when the Highland dress was forbidden, is true to life. "Some went bare," he makes David Balfour say, "only for a hanging cloak or great-coat, and carried their trousers on their backs like a useless burthen; some had made an imitation of the tartan with little parti-colored stripes patched together like an old wife's quilt; others, again, still wore the Highland philabeg, but, by putting a few stitches between the legs, transformed it into a pair of trousers like a Dutchman's." This passage is taken, almost word for word, from one of the pamphlets which he borrowed from the Library. The "French clothes" worn by the Alan Breck of "Kidnapped," blue coat, red waistcoat, black breeches and feathered hat, are so described by the witnesses who gave testimony against the real Alan Breck. The silver buttons, on which Alan sets so much value in the novel, figure also in the evidence. His big great-coat and his fishing rod are there, too. The five guineas, which he receives at the Heugh of Corrynakeigh, were received at that very spot by the Alan of actual history; and the outlaw whistles in the evidence just as he whistles in the novel. When Glenure is shot, "'Oh, I am dead,' he cried, several times over" ("Kidnapped," p. 162). "Glenure several times repeated the words, 'Oh, I am dead'" ("State Trials," Vol. XIX., p. 93). David Balfour tells how, when he and Alan Breck were escaping by night, Alan stole up to the cottages they passed, tapped at the windows, and told the people of Glenure's death. This graphic touch is taken from the evidence of two witnesses, whom

the real Alan roused from sleep to hear the news. One example may be given, to show how skillfully Stevenson seized upon any picturesque incident which could be turned to account, and in what shape he would give it to the world. A letter is to be sent from the Heugh of Corrynakeigh; but in that desert there is neither paper, pen nor ink.

"Kidnapped," p. 207.

"But he was a man of more resources than I knew; searched the wood until he found a quill of a cushat dove, which he shaped into a pen; made himself a kind of ink with gunpowder from his horn and water from the running stream; and tearing a corner from his French military commission (which he carried in his pocket, like a talisman to keep him from the gallows) he sat down and wrote as follows."

"State Trials," XIX., p. 144.

"Alan looked about among the trees, and finding a wood-pigeon's quill, made a pen of it, and having made ink of some powder he took out of a powder-horn that was in his pocket, he wrote a letter."

Every one who is acquainted with the story of Prince Charlie's wanderings will recognize the Cage on Ben Alder ("Kidnapped," p. 223). The walls of natural wood, strengthened with stakes and wattled; the earthen floor; the living tree which was the centre-beam of the roof; the smoke rising against the face of the rock; the cooking and the card-playing; the whole is to be found in Donald Macpherson's well-known description of Cluny's strange hiding-place.

The result of this painstaking method, with its frank and unaffected use of facts, is that the story becomes, of necessity, true to life, and, therefore, convincingly real. It narrates, without exaggeration or false coloring, what actually did take place in a state of society which actually did exist; and Stevenson had entered into the spirit of those times so thoroughly that neither David Balfour nor Alan Breck is represented as saying or doing anything which is not quite natural and possible. Hence it comes to pass that, with something akin to the art of Defoe, he never destroys the reader's interest by compelling him to remember that he is reading fiction. As a work of art, "Catriona," into which the element of invention enters more largely, may not be quite so perfect as "Kidnapped." It is, nevertheless, equally true to history. James More, the son of Bob Roy, was

just such a man as Stevenson describes—if possible even more cunning and treacherous—employed as a spy by the Government of Scotland in 1745, and, after the Appen murder, hired to trepan Alan Breck and bring him from France. The materials on which Stevenson founded his account of this piece of villainy will be found (the episode of the portmanteau included) in *Blackwood's Magazine* for December, 1817, and in the Introduction to "Rob Roy," where, by the bye, we catch our last glimpse of Alan, in 1789, a "raw-boned, grim-looking old man, with the *petit croix* of St. Louis," with gray eyes and a weather-beaten face, sitting quietly by the fireside, in the lodging of a Scottish Benedictine priest in Paris.

Then, his characters speak as they would have spoken in real life. In a work of fiction, the language put into the mouths of the characters ought, if possible, to be the language of the time described. To make the hero of a Scottish story of the Covenanting days, for example, express himself in language which, however quaint it may be, has no resemblance to that spoken or written by the men who fought at Drumclog, or hid from Claverhouse among the moss-hags, is to destroy the verisimilitude of the work; for it is soon and easily perceived that what professes to be the mode of expression of a former generation is, in reality, just a mannerism into which the author has written himself. The delicate taste of Stevenson saved him from this common mistake; and, therefore, there are few, if any, anachronisms of phraseology in "Kidnapped" or "Catriona." David Balfour writes and speaks exactly as a fairly well-educated man of his class would have written and spoken at that time; and hence it is that we perceive, blending with the words and idioms of the Scottish dialect, an exquisite, subtle aroma, which is wafted from the eighteenth century, from the serene grace of Addison and the playful irony of Goldsmith.

Stevenson, again, is never prolix. In a single sentence he can paint a landscape which extends for miles, or describe some important incident. We are at Hermiston. "All beyond and about is the great field of the hills; the plover, the curlew and the lark cry there; the wind blows as it blows in a ship's rigging, hard and cold and pure; and the hilltops huddle one behind another, like a herd of cattle, into the sunset." Toward the end of "Catriona," it is necessary to allude to the execution of Alan's brother; but

with what art it is done. The wood of Lettermore, where Glengure was shot, has already been described in "Kidnapped"—the craggy mountain-side, the overhanging birches, the bridle-path along the margin of the water. And so, in "Catriona," he merely pauses, for a moment, to tell us how "in course of time, on November 8th, and in the midst of a prodigious storm of wind and rain, poor James of the Glens was duly hanged at Lettermore by Ballachulish." Thus in a few words, just the right number and no more, a picture is drawn, and the whole scene of the tragedy is before us. Pascal apologized for the length of one of his Letters by saying that he had no time to make it shorter. Stevenson found time to compress into four lines of print what might have furnished some less artistic writer with, perhaps, four pages of description; and there are numberless other occasions, throughout his works, on which he might have introduced a purple patch, but when he preferred to search for that one sentence which should, in a few luminous touches, tell us all that is necessary, but nothing more, about some incident which must be mentioned in order to the full development of the story. In short, as a painter in words, his mastery over the principles of perspective is complete.

The Editorial Note which is appended to "Weir of Hermiston" enables us to trace Stevenson's method in the production of his last novel. There is no Scottish judge, except perhaps Lord Monboddo, about whom so many stories have been told us as about Lord-Justice-Clerk Macquene of Braxfield. His formidable appearance is described, and some of his heartless sayings on the bench are recorded, by Lord Cockburn; and if letters of his, which still lie among the papers of some families in Scotland, were published, it would be found that the popular idea of his character has all along been correct. It occurred to Stevenson that this man, a great lawyer, but of a singularly hard spirit, might be made the central figure of a romance, of which the chief features were to be the misunderstandings which often occur between father and son, and "the problems and emotions arising from a conflict between duty and nature in a judge." These are words in which we have the spectacle of a father condemning his own son to death; and it appears that Stevenson's first intention was that Lord Hermiston should send Archie to the gallows. But he soon came to see how crude this idea was, and that some

means must be found by which the story should not only exhibit the judge's stern, unbending sense of duty, but at the same time be kept within the bounds of possibility. He could easily have written a melodramatic "trial scene," with the father on the bench and the son in the dock; but no art could have made it true to nature, for it could never have taken place in real life. Therefore, he turned from such a violation of possibilities; and it is clear, from letters quoted in the Editorial Note, that, in the words of Mr. Sidney Colvin, "he intended other persons, before Archie, to have fallen first under suspicion of the murder." At the trial of these persons something was to come out, which led to the arrest of Archie.

The way in which Stevenson tackled some legal questions which arose is very characteristic. "I wish," he wrote to Mr. Charles Baxter, "Pitcairn's 'Criminal Trials,' *quam primum*. Also, an absolutely correct copy of the Scots judiciary oath. Also, in case Pitcairn does not come down late enough, I wish as full a report as possible of a Scots murder trial between 1790 and 1820. Understand, the *fullest possible*." And then, in the frankest way imaginable, he asks for information on a point of Scottish criminal procedure of so elementary a nature that the youngest lawyer in Edinburgh could have answered it offhand. ("Weir of Hermiston," p. 271.) But Stevenson, who had laid aside his wig and gown long before, was far too conscientious and thoroughgoing to rely on his recollections of what he must have known in his Parliament House days, and he would not run the slightest risk that, even on a technical point of legal practice, his novel might not be quite correct. One of his friends in the Speculative Society had been Mr. Graham Murray, now Lord Advocate, who told him how the land lay. "Graham Murray's note *re* the venue was highly satisfactory, and did me all the good in the world," he writes.

But this point in the story was never reached; and we are left to picture for ourselves how adroitly the situation would have been worked out. We can imagine the scene; a crowded courtroom on the Western Circuit; the judge, who had been pressing every point against the accused, suddenly noticing some flaw in the evidence, taking the examination into his own hands, and following it up till he came to a point at which he perceived (before any one else?) that it would incriminate his own son,

and yet never flinching, but asking question after question till the truth came out. Then would have followed the whispered consultation among the Crown Counsel, the discharge of the accused, the rising of the Court, and Lord Hermiston going home, with the knowledge that Archie was to be arrested and tried for his life. Here were all the elements of a great tragedy; and a great tragedy indeed it would have been in Stevenson's hands.

"I expect," he wrote to Mr. Baxter, "'The Justice Clerk' to be my masterpiece." But the Fates had decided otherwise. It was his custom to have more than one book on the stocks; and "Weir of Hermiston" was interrupted by "The Ebb Tide" and "St. Ives," so that month after month passed without much progress being made. "Then, in the last weeks of his life, he attacked the task again, in a sudden heat of inspiration, and worked at it ardently, and without interruption, until the end came." Thus "Weir of Hermiston" remains an unfinished fragment. But what a noble fragment! It is Stevenson at his very best, as if the fire of his genius had blazed up, more brightly than ever, for a moment before it was finally quenched. His mode of composition, the conscious art with which he wrote, the scrupulous choosing and rejecting of words, the polishing of phrases, might, by the time "Hermiston" came to be written, have debased his style to baldness, or mere artificiality, if he had not been so really great a Man of Letters as he was. Instead of this, his style here is mellower, deeper, richer than in any of his other works. There is in this last book of his a breadth and force, an indescribable something, like an inspiration, which had raised him, at last, very nearly to the level of Scott.

The art of Stevenson has been compared to the art of Scott. But their methods were essentially different. Scott poured forth treasures of knowledge, invention, humor, pathos, anecdote from an exhaustless store, poured them forth artlessly, almost at random. Stevenson, who, brilliant though he was, had neither the accumulated resources of Scott, nor so luxuriant a fancy, collected his materials with immense pains, sifted them laboriously, and when he came to use them never rested till he had everything in its proper place, and displayed to the best possible advantage. His jewels are none of them rough diamonds. Every gem is cut, polished to the highest point, and set in gold of rare and cunning workmanship. But, conscious though he was, in every fibre,

of his own art, he was far too shrewd not to acknowledge that it was beyond his power to reach the lofty eminence occupied by Scott, and that he could never have created the Baron of Bradwardine, or the Antiquary, or Jeanie Deans, nor woven together such a masterpiece as the plot of "Guy Mannering." He spoke of Scott as "out and away the King of the romantics," who shared with Balzac and Thackeray in "Vanity Fair" "the real creator's brush." At the same time, he would scarcely allow that Scott was an artist. He calls "The Pirate" an "ill-written, ragged book." He speaks of Scott as jobbing off languid, inarticulate twaddle upon his readers, and writing bad English and bad narrative. "He was a great day-dreamer, a seer of fit and beautiful and humorous visions, but hardly a great artist; hardly, in the manful sense, an artist at all. He pleased himself, and so he pleases us. Of the pleasures of his art he tasted fully; but of its toils and vigils and distresses never man knew less. A great romantic—an idle child." These words are virtually a confession, and they reveal the secret of that conscious elaboration which produced the marvellous beauty of form which distinguishes, without exception, all the writings of Stevenson. There can be little doubt that what he wrote will stand the test of time, and that hereafter he will hold a place in the goodly fellowship of the immortals, with Balzac, and Defoe, and Cervantes, and the rest; but no man knew better than Stevenson that, far above them all, Scott moves by himself along the higher ridges of the mountain-tops, unapproachable.

G. W. T. OMOND.